

Down among the dead

Lara finds herself in Egypt on the trail of the tomb's lost treasures. Having discovered a notebook which might lead her to her goal, Lara showed her discovery to Egyptologist Dr Alvin Blackmore. But Dr Blackmore has suddenly died, and pages from the book have gone missing. In this fourth episode, ERICA WAGNER's tale follows Lara to Luxor...

LARA DIDN'T WASTE any time. She left Cairo as soon as she'd arrived, dozing on the train down to Luxor. She crossed the river to the West Bank, nearer to the Valley of the Kings, and found a room in a grotty little guesthouse. She dropped her bag, and headed off to the Hilton. It was early evening now, and the day had begun to cool. Conscious of being in a Muslim country, Lara had changed into long trousers and a long-sleeved shirt; she'd wrapped a scarf around her hair. At the entrance to the hotel the doorman gave her a suitably imperious nod but at least allowed her to pass; a blast of damp, air-conditioned air chilled her as she passed up to reception.

"Yes?" inquired the concierge. It was only then that it occurred to Lara to wonder whom she should be asking for. But there was only one name she knew. "I'm here to see Dr Blackmore," she said, recalling the last time she had used those words and wondering what she would find this time. "I believe he's expecting me. My name is Lara Croft."

"Yes, Miss Croft," said the sleepy-eyed concierge. "You will go upstairs. Room 611, if you please."

Lara passed through the ornate lobby – all pale marble and gold – and let the lift enclose her. The hotel seemed very quiet, a few people sitting downstairs on cream leather sofas, nothing more – although she knew this was the height of the tourist season, after the worst of the summer heat had passed. At the sixth floor she got out, and found her way to Blackmore's room. Well, time to discover what was really up. She knocked on the door.

Silence. She knocked again. "Hello?" she called. Still silence. She tried the door handle and to her surprise, the door swung open.

If, in Blackmore's office, she hadn't been certain of the look of a rifled room, now she was in no doubts. The room was empty and nearly dark; when she tried a light switch nothing happened; the power must have been cut. But pulling a small torch from the pocket of her jacket she cast its beam around the room to reveal drawers that had been flung out of their chests, the wardrobe door wide open, a delicate escriptoire plundered – the room was awash in expensive socks, acres of rumpled broadcloth, torn papers and books. Stepping softly in the thick pile carpet, her heart in her throat, she saw the pages of a glossy magazine ruffle in the breeze: a window was open. When she peered out of it, she saw that it led down a white-painted iron fire-escape, obviously how the intruder – with Blackmore as his captive, she supposed – had escaped.

Where could he have gone? Could he know where the tomb was without her half of the notebook? It was just possible. What could she do? As she stood, wondering, the beam of her torch caught a matchbook resting on a low coffee-table that was bare of anything else; in the havoc of the room it could only look deliberate. She picked it up. The Ibis, it said; nothing more. She slipped it into her pocket, closed the window, left the room and headed downstairs.

The concierge gazed listlessly at her as she walked out of the lift. "Thanks," she called, brightly, and made as if to head out the door. No need to tell him what she'd seen. The last thing she needed was to be questioned by the Luxor police, heaven help her. "Oh –" and stepping back towards the desk pulled the matchbook from her pocket. "Know where this is?"

The man nodded and gave her an address, not far from her guesthouse. He even drew her a little map and she headed off into the maze of Luxor's streets.

She walked back to the Nile ferry, then stood on its deck, thinking hard. Whoever was behind all this clearly felt the risks entailed in the enterprise were worth it.

She remembered what she'd read of Tutankhamun's headstrong young widow, herself the daughter of Akhenaten and Nefertiti. The boy-king – whose own death, in any event, was still mysterious – had been succeeded by his vizier, Ay. Perhaps Ankhensenamun had married him, perhaps not: in

any case, she had searched for another husband of her own choice, writing to the Hittite king, Suppiluliumas, asking him to send one of his sons for her to marry. "They say you have many sons and if you send me one of yours, he shall be my husband... I shall never take a servant of mine to make him my husband." Lara recalled thinking, as she'd read those last lines, how easy she'd found it to imagine the relationship: the widow must have had with the wily vizier, many years her senior, her ruler and yet still – in her proud royal eyes – her servant. Ankhensenamun's disappearance from the scene after that Lara couldn't help but find sinister; and wondered what her tomb – if indeed this was what everything was leading to – would reveal.

At last, Lara found what she was looking for and her ruminations ended abruptly. Down the dark alley, a battered neon sign glimmered ahead of her: IBIS. Around the name a bird's beak curved. This was the place. Just as well; she was thirsty now, and hoped she could get a beer. She pushed open the door and went in to the bar.

Clearly this wasn't happy hour. The bar was quiet, except for the vague noise of an old black-and-white television in a corner; the click of chess pieces as two old men bent over a game opposite. She could hear sand scratch beneath the soles of her boots. She ordered a beer from the lugubrious barman and settled herself down near the back door. Something, she was sure, would come up.

"You a stranger in these parts?"

Lara turned her head towards the voice, more slowly than her alarm would have had her do.

"Who wants to know?" she asked casually. The stranger stood over her, a handsome man, younger than she was, she guessed, in a white linen suit and an old Panama hat, which he now removed with deference – or mock deference, Lara couldn't be sure. "Would you be the sheriff in these parts?" Lara lifted an eyebrow and stared into the stranger's black eyes.

"Not at all, my dear," the man laughed. Now she heard he was as English as she. "How do you do? Name's Haggarty, Blade Haggarty."

Haggarty – the name on the Post-It. The contact who had betrayed Blackmore? Lara felt certain of it.

"And you would be –"

"Emily," Lara said quickly. She didn't like this Blade one bit. She knew she had a tendency to snap judgments; a tendency, she reminded herself silently, which had saved her life on more than one occasion. To be fair, his pale suit didn't look like he'd recently made a hasty exit down a fire escape, but you could never be certain.

"Well, Emily; what brings you to Luxor?" He grinned at her with white teeth.

"Just a tourist," she answered.

"Interested in the tombs?"

"I guess." She thought of the word to describe the expression on his face. Leering. Ugh.

"Perhaps I might – show you around?" he offered genially.

"I'm practically a native now, you know. I'm with Reuters, by the way. A hack, you might say. A bit of a lonely hack." He winked. Ugh, ugh, ugh.

"Thanks, but no thanks," she said. She put a few coins on the table and checked her watch. Something wasn't right, and she thought it would be best to cut her losses. "My, is that the time? I am tired. I'm afraid I must leave you. It has been a pleasure," she said. She pushed back her chair and headed out the back door, into the alley at the side of the bar. She knew she shouldn't have the second she'd done it – in at the back, out at the front – but it was too late. He'd followed her, and blocked her path.

"Don't leave me so soon, Miss Croft," he hissed. "I couldn't



bear it." In the blue dark she could just make out the dull gleam from the barrel of his gun. Could she reach hers? It would be no good. She imagined the explosion in this narrow canyon of old brick. Bad idea. Her last battle – sitting in front of her computer screen – flashed through her mind. This was never a problem in those wretched games.

"Give me the notebook."

"What notebook?" she asked coolly.

"Don't play coy with me, Croft," he snapped. "You won't live to regret it."

"Where's Blackmore?"

"Oh, we're asking the questions now, are we?" Haggarty sneered. "I don't think we're in a very good position to do that, dearest Lara, do you?"

"Why did you ask my name if you knew it?" she inquired evenly.

"I wanted to hear you lie. You're quite good at it, I think."

"You'll find I'm quite good at most things."

He didn't see it coming, her right foot out the darkness, kicking the gun out of his hand. It spun away, far out of his reach and hers, but he didn't hesitate – he lunged at her, tackling her to the ground by virtue of his superior weight and height.

It was more than that though – Lara fought to free herself but he was damn strong; he had her arm pinned to her side and she could smell the drink on his breath, his rank sweat. She snapped her teeth, trying to bite him, but he jerked away and laughed.

"Oh, Lara, I just can't wait to see what else you're good at," he growled. His full weight was on top of her and now he brought one hand up to her throat. She felt it close around her windpipe and now she thrashed in desperation; at this rate she wouldn't be conscious for much longer. The light of bloodlust was in his eyes; victory so close it made him lazy – Lara was just able to squeeze her arm behind her back to the knife she always carried, nestled snugly in the small of her back. Her fingers curled over the hilt just as the world began to grow grey.

His eyes opened wide with surprise when she thrust the blade into the base of his neck. He didn't even groan. A gout of black blood drenched his white suit and she felt its warmth through her shirt. His grip relaxed and she was able to roll out from under him.

She searched through his pockets. Ah – his wallet. And sure enough, when she shook it, out fluttered the missing pages of the notebook. Lara made her way out into the alley. When she finally found herself under a streetlight, she squatted on the pavement and had her first good look at the notebook since she'd taken it from the archive. Could she figure it out by herself? Well, now she'd have to. She had no choice.

The next instalment of Down among the Dead will appear on Christmas Eve. The story will run until New Year's Day.

THE TIMES LEVEL OF LARA CROFT IS HERE!

The exclusive Times level has been specially written for Times readers, and is set in and around the newspaper. It starts with our editor, Peter Stothard, asking Lara to see him – to tell her of a hush-hush find in Egypt and an unfolding mystery. Lara soon gets to work for us – checking out information in our archives then embarking on the dangerous mission.

To complete the level she must get to grips with plenty of weapons and tools. Then she will have to solve specific puzzles while dodging traps and some chilling enemies – like scarab beetles, bats, mummies and skeletons.

There are two ways of obtaining our exclusive level: From today, a special limited edition CD-Rom will be available to the first 5000 readers who call our Lara hotline on 09069 130 707.

Calls cost £1 a minute and the maximum cost will be £2.50. Phone as soon as you can, because the demand is bound to be huge and supply is strictly limited for this collector's item.

Alternatively, from this Tuesday, anyone connected to the Internet will be able to download the special Times level to their PC.

The game will be available to download via www.the-times.co.uk/lara/

Downloading instructions:

- You first need to check if your machine is powerful enough to contain Lara. Core Design, the makers of the Tomb Raider games, including The Times version, recommend a minimum of a Pentium processor running at 233MHz, 16Mb of memory, all running Windows 95/98. An internet connection is also required to download the game.

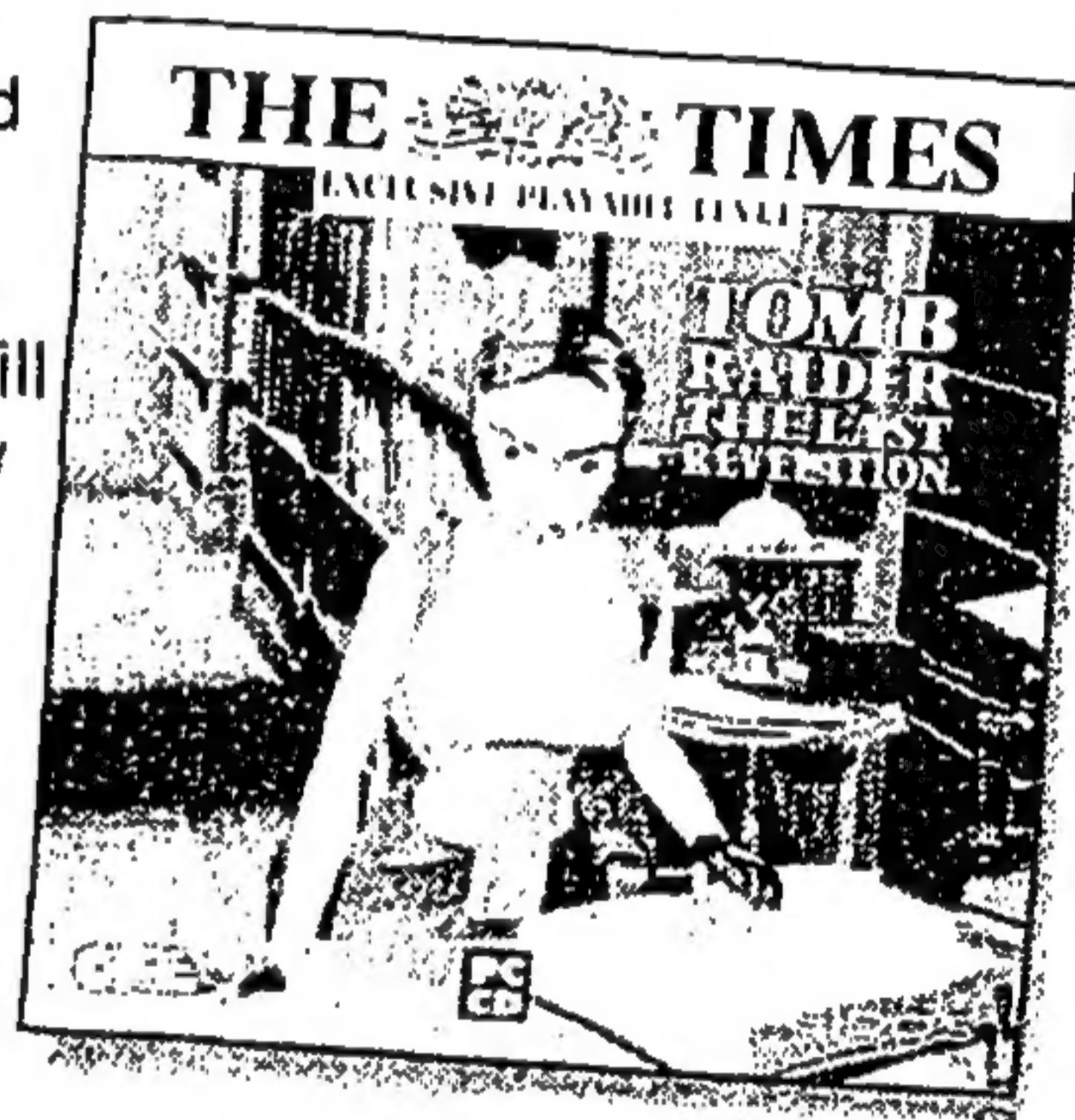
- You will also need to be running DirectX6.1 or better. To find which version of DirectX you have, double-click on the My Computer icon, then click on C:, Program Files, DirectX, Setup, and finally DXDiag.

This program will then show which version of DirectX you have installed. If it is less than DirectX6.1 you need to upgrade by going to <http://windowsupdate.microsoft.com> in your web browser, and following the instructions on the screen.

- When ready to download The Times Tomb Raider, point your browser at www.the-times.co.uk/lara/ and click on the link to download the program. It will ask whether you wish to Open the File or Save to Disk. Select Open The File, and click OK. It will then start to download.

- The whole game is around 10Mb big and so – depending on the speed of your internet connection – will take around 1-2 hours. Do this in the evening, or at the weekend, and the phone call will cost around £1 with a standard ISP.

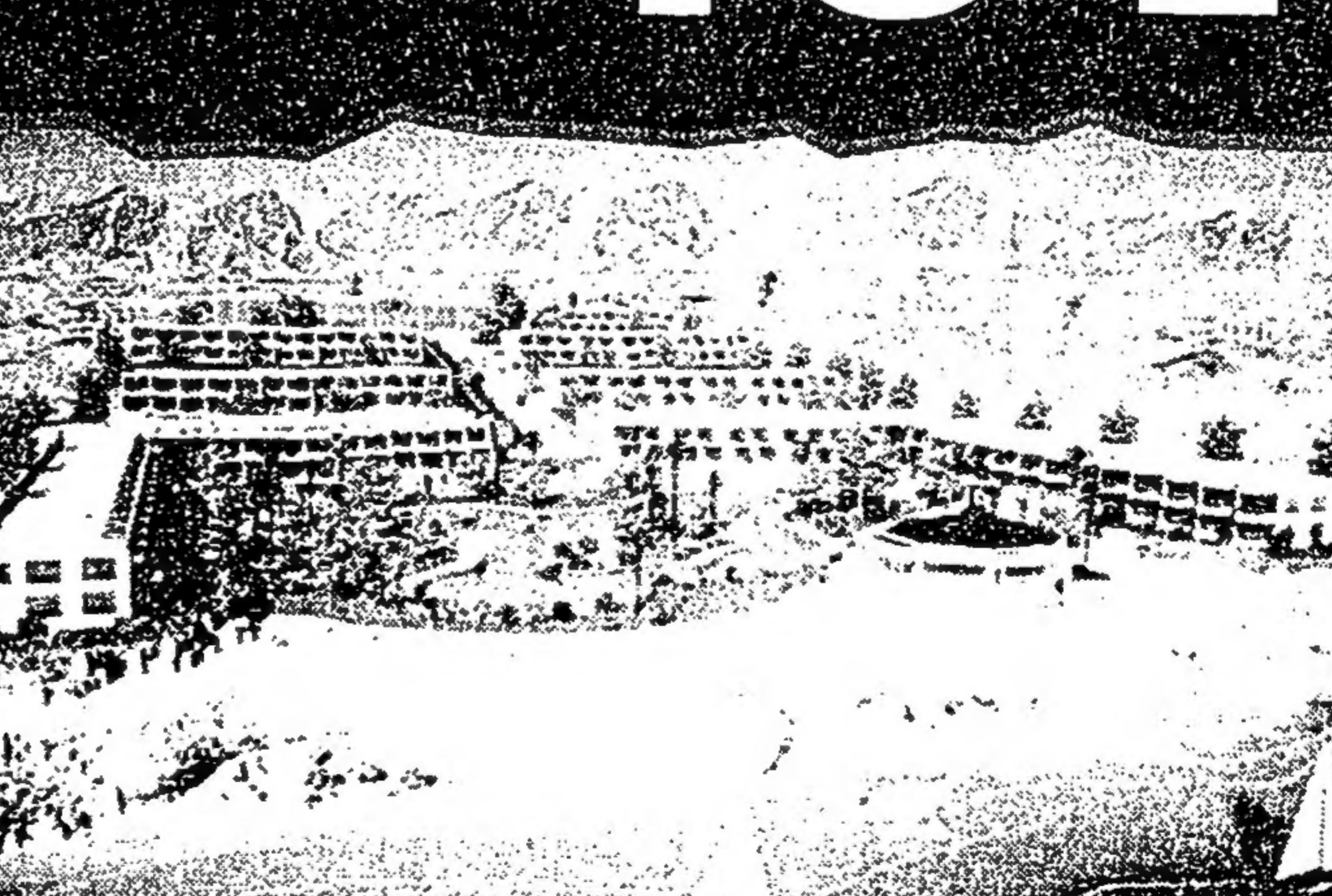
- When the program has finished downloading, it will install itself. You are ready to play.



These instructions will also be available in Monday's Interface, and are posted on www.the-times.co.uk/lara/

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CHANGING TIMES

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FAMILY HOLIDAYS TO EGYPT TO BE WON

From now until the New Year, The Times, Eidos and Microsoft are giving you the chance to win some fantastic prizes. But there is a catch – you have to solve Lara's seven riddles. The first three have already been published, but will be printed again on Christmas Eve. Each individual riddle offers the chance to win Lara Croft merchandise. Solving all seven gives the chance to win a Goldenjoy Holidays family trip to Egypt. The next riddle appears on Christmas Eve.

USING THE TIMES ROSETTA STONE (RIGHT) AS A KEY, TRANSLATE AND RE-ARRANGE THE PIECES OF THE SMASHED TABLET BELOW TO FIT THE BLANK GRID (WE HAVE ALREADY INSERTED THREE BLOCKS TO GET YOU STARTED). EACH PIECE CONTAINS THREE ELEMENTS – HIEROGLYPHS OR SPACES. SOLVE THE RIDDLE. WHEN YOU HAVE THE ANSWER, RING THE COMPETITION HOTLINE, LEAVING THE ANSWER, YOUR NAME, ADDRESS AND DAYTIME TELEPHONE NUMBER. ENTRIES MAY ALSO BE MADE VIA www.the-times.co.uk/lara/. CLUES MAY BE FOUND ON OUR WEBSITE AND AT www.microsoft.com/uk/encarta/

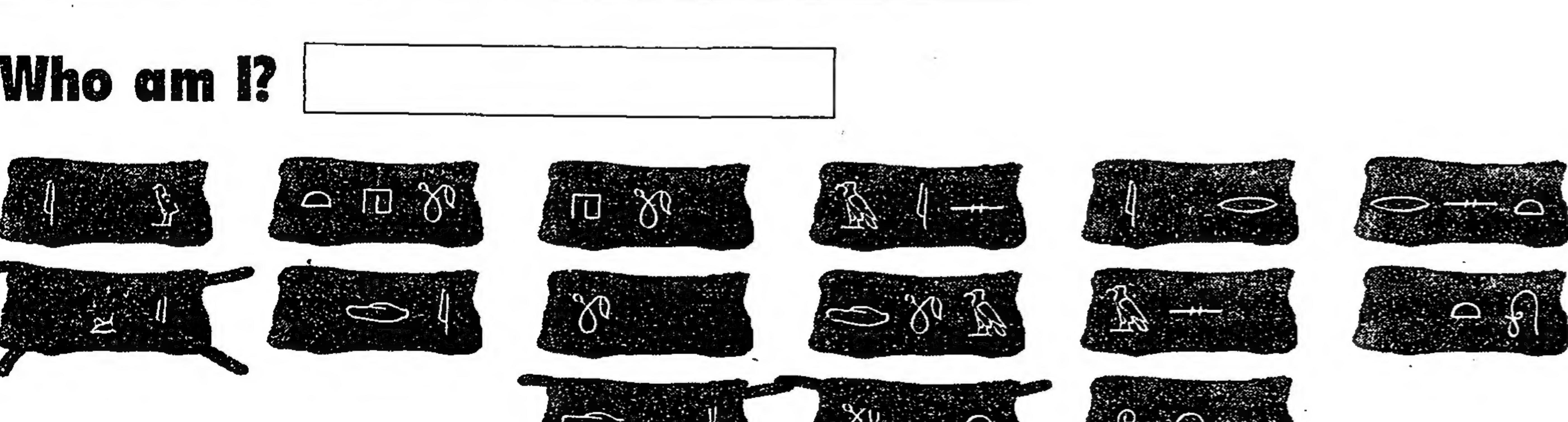
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LINES FOR THIS WEEK CLOSE MIDNIGHT DECEMBER 23

Who am I?



PRIZES:

ONE WEEKLY FIRST PRIZE:
6 ft Lara Model, Lara Padded team Jacket, Tomb Raider games 1, 2, 3 and 4, Lara Analogue watch, Lara Ladies watch, Lara wallet, Lara Back pack, Lara Towel, Lara CD Case, Lara Mousemat, one copy of Microsoft Encarta Reference Suite 2000

ONE WEEKLY SECOND PRIZE:
Tomb Raider games 1, 2, 3 and 4, Lara Desk Statue, Lara Wallet, Bath Towel, Half Zip fleece, Lara Analogue watch, Lara Ladies watch, Lara T Shirt, Lara Mousemat, one copy of Microsoft Encarta Reference Suite 2000

FOUR WEEKLY THIRD PRIZES:
Lara desk statue, Lara Bath towel, Lara wallet, Lara Bobble hat, Lara Polo shirt, Lara Mousemat